



Πρόγραμμα
για την Ενίσχυση της
Διεπιστημονικής Έρευνας
και Καινοτομίας



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Ερευνητικό Πρόγραμμα

«Πρόσβαση στην Ανώτατη Εκπαίδευση.

**Μελέτη των κοινωνικών, εκπαιδευτικών και θεσμικών διαστάσεων της
ζήτησης τριτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης, των προβλημάτων και των πολιτικών
ικανοποίησής της – μία Συγκριτική και εμπειρική προσέγγιση»**

“Access to Higher Education.

**A study of the social, educational and institutional dimensions
of demand for and supply of higher education in Greece.
Problems and policies in comparative-historical
and empirical perspective.”**

**ΔΡΑΣΗ 7 - Μελέτη της διεθνούς εμπειρίας αναφορικά με το ζήτημα της
πρόσβασης στην τριτοβάθμια εκπαίδευση**

Hans-Georg Kotthoff

Study of international experience regarding issues
of access to higher education: the German case

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Study of international experience regarding issues of access to higher education: the German case¹

Hans-Georg Kotthoff

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1) Introduction: remit, scope of analysis and relevant terms

The aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, it aims to provide a critical analysis of the features, issues and problems concerning access to higher education in Germany. Secondly, it also aims to pay attention to those issues, which are affecting access to higher education in Greece and which have been identified in the remit². These are, in particular, the excessive demand for university education, which has – in the Greek case - led to student immigration to other (mostly European) countries, disparities in demand for higher education between different institutions of higher education and between disciplines, ungrounded expectations of Greek families and students with regard to the impact of higher education on upward socio-economic mobility, the impact of access to higher education on upper secondary education, impeding structural and rigid institutional regulations with regard to the organisation of higher education as well as the admission and selection of students, difficulties in reforming the higher education access system, limited alternative routes into higher education and financial austerity measures and reduction of state subsidies to higher education. This study will analyse national traditions of access to higher education in Germany which have been influential until the present day (2), place the main issues of access to higher education in their historical and legal context (3), analyse current discourses and policies of access to higher education (4), critically review the past and present system (5) and discuss initiatives for the future (6). The drawing of conclusions for the deeper understanding and reform of the Greek system of access to higher education is not part of this report but will follow the comparative analyses of the four country reports (Finland, France, Germany and UK) and will be the responsibility of the international research consortium.

International comparative research on access to higher education is confronted with a multitude of definitions and concepts which stress different aspects, phases, levels, institutions and actors of the HE access process and product. The same applies to the research of this phenomenon in the German context, which makes the definition of the usage of the relevant terms and concepts inevitable, particularly with regard to the intended subsequent international comparative analyses. According to Lewin & Lischka (2004), the term ‘access to higher education’ (*Hochschulzugang*) is an ‘iridescent term’ with different meanings in the German research literature and is mostly closely related to, but not synonymous with, terms such as ‘admission to higher education’ (*Hochschulzulassung*) and ‘routes of higher education admission’ (*Hochschulzugangswegen*), but also ‘entitlement to study’ (*Studienberechtigung*), which in the German context includes a legal right to study, the ‘ability to study’ (*Studierfähigkeit*) and more recently also the ‘selection of students’ (*Auswahl von Studierenden*) (op-cit., 82).

In this study the term ‘admission to higher education’ (*Hochschulzulassung*) is used to describe the successful admission into higher education, which is usually granted by the higher education institutions themselves. The term ‘access to higher education’ (*Hochschulzugang*) is used in a much broader sense and denotes the organisation of the various routes in higher education, which are open to students depending on their prior qualifications. Following Lischka’s analytical distinction, it includes the ‘process’ of access to higher education (i.e. information, consultation, examination, decision) as well as the ‘product’ of this access (i.e. taking up a course of study at an institutions of higher education) (Lischka 2001, 30-31). This differentiation has two implications for the following analysis. Firstly, access to higher education covers an extended length of time which stretches from the last years of the upper secondary school to the end of the first years of study. Secondly,

² Cp. ‘Research Programme Access to Higher Education’ (Dimitris Mattheou, 19.10.2012)

processes of access to higher education must be analysed on different levels: the individual level (e.g. from the student's perspective), the institutional level (i.e. from the perspective of upper secondary schools and/or institutions of higher education) and the system's level (e.g. system of admission to higher education). While the processes of access to higher education are primarily studied on the individual and the institutional level, the products of access to higher education are analysed on the institutional and system's level (ibid.).

A further useful distinction for the analysis of access to higher education has been introduced by Orr & Hovdhaugen (*forthcoming*), who differentiate between a qualitative and a quantitative problem of access to higher education:

In other words, it is about *who should get into higher education*, on the one hand. The qualitative criteria are usually based primarily on academic merit, under the premise that higher education requires particular cognitive abilities to enable the person to truly benefit from the experience. Secondly, the qualitative criteria entail assumptions about the type of person, who is appropriate for higher education, in general, or for higher education in a specific higher education institution. On the other hand, admission systems also involve a quantitative issue. At least in this respect of the state-regulated part of higher education system, there is an assumption about the necessary or feasible size of any higher education system, i.e. *how many should get in* (op. cit, 4).

Systems of higher education will find different solutions to these qualitative and quantitative problems of access to higher education, which are embedded in their national traditions, institutional settings and organisational procedures and practice on the supply side and the behaviour of prospective students on the demand side (cp. Orr, Gwosc & Netz 2011, 26). This study aims to describe and analyse the German reactions and 'solutions' to these qualitative and quantitative problems of access to higher education, which will arise in any given system of higher education.

Finally, and given the increasing diversification of the tertiary sector, a study on access to higher education in Germany needs to define what exactly is meant by the term 'higher education' (in short: HE). In this study the term HE includes all institutions which belong to the tertiary sector (ISCED level 5). In the German context this means traditional universities, technical universities, universities of education, universities of music and universities of art. In addition, the term HE also includes universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*). This type of HE institution was established during the 1970s. Universities of applied sciences aim to provide application-orientated teaching and research and are usually specialized HE institutions in the fields of business & administration and engineering and – to a lesser degree – social services and design. In this study the term HE, however, does not include the so-called *Berufsakademien*, which offer academic training at a *Studienakademie* (study institution) combined with practical in-company professional training in keeping with the principle of the dual system. *Berufsakademien* were founded in the state (*Land*³) of Baden-Württemberg as pilot projects during the 1970s and permitted by law in 1982. Although *Berufskademien* formally belong to the tertiary sector and have gained the status of institutions of HE (*Hochschulen*) in 1999 in some *Länder* (e.g. Baden-Württemberg), they are not considered in this study because access to these types of HE institutions is not granted by the *Land* or the institutions of HE, but exclusively by the companies, which also pay their students a salary during their 3-years-course of combined study and training.

³ In the remainder of this report I will use the German terms *Land* or *Länder* (in the plural) to avoid misunderstandings, which could derive from the use of the English term 'state'.

2) Access to HE in Germany: national traditions

Access to HE is influenced by a large number of factors which range from the number of potential and eligible students in a given age cohort, their qualitative potential (e.g. their competences, experiences etc.), the number of available places and courses at institutions of HE, alternative employment possibilities and their attractiveness, the financial costs (e.g. study fees, cost of living etc.) and the expected benefit of studying or alternative training places and facilities (Lewin & Lischka 2004, 85). In addition to these general factors which apply to any given system of HE, access to HE in Germany is also strongly influenced by specific national traditions, which help to provide a deeper understanding of the present situation. In the German case these are the traditional vertical differentiation of the school system at the secondary level, which provides ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ routes into HE, the long tradition of separation between academic and vocational education routes at the upper secondary level and the dominance of the *Abitur* as the main traditional entrance qualification for access to HE.

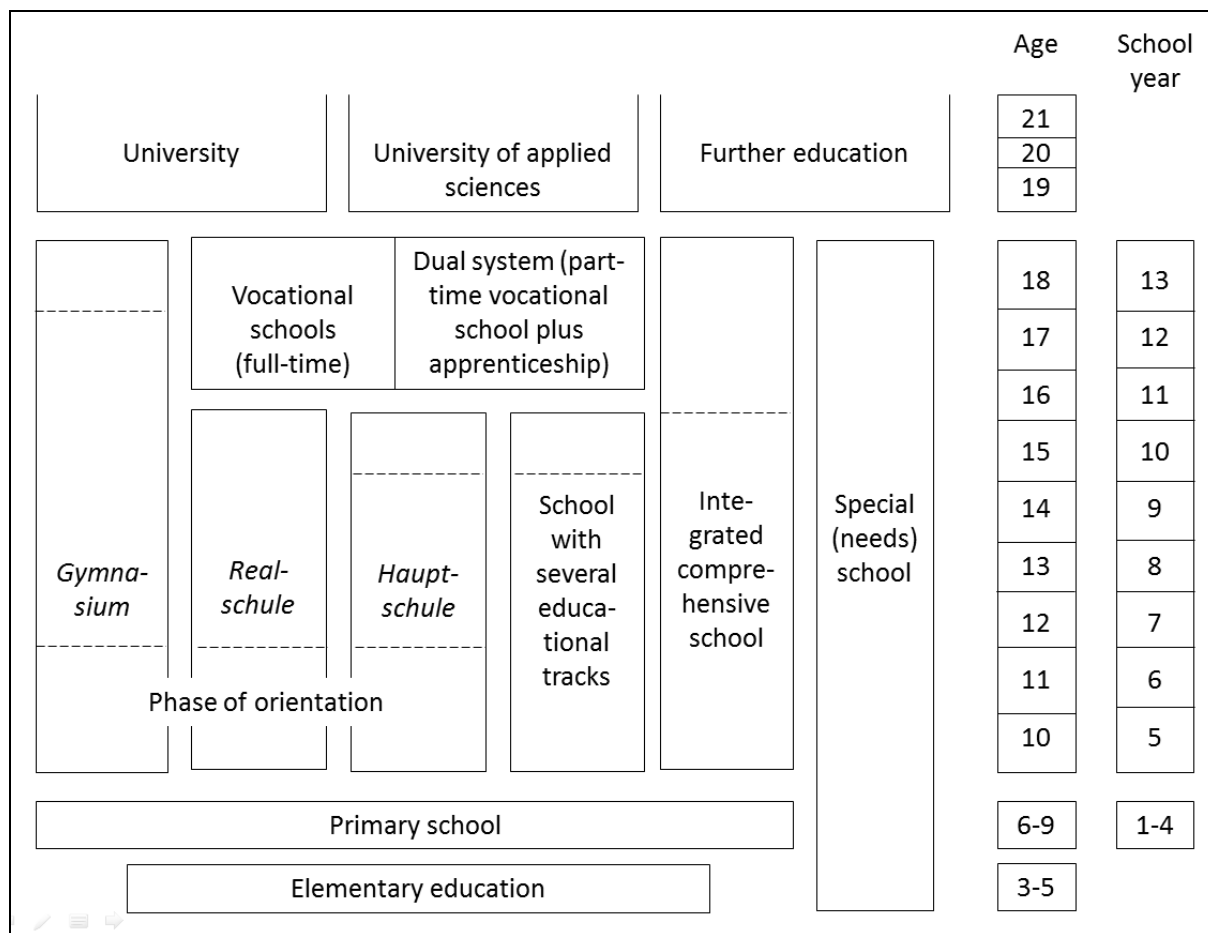
Direct and indirect routes into HE: the vertical differentiation of the German secondary school system⁴

The traditionally strong vertical differentiation of the German secondary school system is relevant for the issue of access to HE in Germany, because the distinctive secondary school types at ISCED 2 level⁵ provide different qualifications and entitlements, which in their turn limit or widen opportunities of access to HE at a later stage of the school career. In addition, the initial distribution to a certain secondary school track, which already takes place at the end of the primary school (i.e. at age of 10 or 12 depending on the individual *Länder* regulations), is of particular importance, because the permeability between lower secondary schools is quite low in Germany and works mostly ‘downwards’ (i.e. from the academically oriented to the vocationally oriented tracks and not vice versa) (cp. Bellenberg, Hovestadt & Klemm 2004). This means that once children have been distributed to a certain secondary track, they are quite likely to stay there and finish with school-leaving qualifications which in many cases do not qualify them directly for HE access. Of course, students can always make the effort to find indirect and alternative, usually vocationally orientated, educational routes into HE (s. below), but given the high social selectivity of the German school system, it seems highly likely that the number of potential HE students is substantially higher than the number of enrolled students (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2010).

The following diagram gives a first, simplified overview of the education system and its different school types, levels and phases, which will subsequently be explained in more detail.

⁴ For more detailed information on the German school system see my earlier publication (Kotthoff 2011), which also serves as a basis for this section and the following section on general and vocational education routes into HE.

⁵ Currently there are six different types of lower secondary schools at this level (age 10-15/16) in the German school system (cp. diagram on page 5).



The diagram shows the strong vertical differentiation of the German secondary school system (ISCED 2). After the common primary school (*Grundschule*), which is attended by all children, lasts for four years (1-4) and covers the age range from 6-9/10 years in most of the 16 *Länder*, the lower secondary school (years 5-9/10) is traditionally characterised by a multitude of different types of secondary schools. In addition to the numerous ‘special (needs) schools’ (*Sonderschulen*), there are up to five different tracks or types of secondary schools respectively.

The first type of secondary school, the *Hauptschule*, is to be found in almost all *Länder* except the former East German *Länder* and the Saarland and includes years 5-9 or 10. In some *Länder* compulsory schooling and, therefore, also the duration of the *Hauptschule* has been extended to year 10. In other *Länder* year 10 of the *Hauptschule* is optional and is attended by about 20 percent of the pupils. The *Hauptschule*, which in recent years has been named the ‘loser of the educational expansion’ and even ‘*Restschule*’ (‘left-over’ school) because of its academic quality and its rapidly declining numbers of students, is facing an increasingly difficult challenge caused by extremely heterogeneous pupils with very high numbers of socio-economically deprived and poorly motivated children. In the face of these challenges the total closure of the *Hauptschule* seems to be a question of time rather than a matter of principle.

In contrast to the *Hauptschule*, the development of the second type of secondary school, the *Realschule*, can be described as a success story in terms of pupil enrolment numbers which have increased from 10-12 percent of all 14-year-olds in the 1960s to 26 percent in recent

years (op. cit., 286). The curriculum of the *Realschule* is – quite similar to the *Hauptschule* – mostly targeted towards the labour market and offers an explicitly vocational orientation as well as encounters with the world of work through periods of practical training and work placements. However, by offering a second optional foreign language to its pupils the *Realschul*-leaving certificate does not only qualify for vocational training and apprenticeships but may also qualify – depending on the final grades achieved - for the upper secondary phase of the *Gymnasium* and/or various types of vocational upper secondary schools (e.g. *Fachoberschule*) which can provide access to technical colleges and other institutions of higher education. About one third of all *Realschul*-leavers take the opportunity to continue their studies in the upper secondary school sector.

The third type of secondary school, the academically oriented *Gymnasium* comprises the years 5-10 and 10-12/13 and covers therefore the lower and the upper secondary school phase. The high reputation and the popularity of the *Gymnasium* amongst parents and in public opinion can be explained by the fact that the *Gymnasium* offers the direct path into higher education after successful completion of the *Abitur* while also offering the best chances of getting hold of the more attractive training places and the more sought after positions on the labour market. As a result the proportion of 14-year-old pupils attending the *Gymnasium* has risen from 14 percent in 1960 to about 33 percent in 2009 (op. cit.: 286) which has changed the formerly rather elitist character of the *Gymnasium* considerably. The last major reform of the *Gymnasium* concerned its reduction in duration from nine to eight years which, to date, has been implemented in all 16 *Länder* apart from Rheinland-Pfalz. This reduction has brought about substantial changes and concentrations in the subject curricula which have not always been popular with the parents and the pupils.

The fourth type of secondary school, the ‘integrated comprehensive school’ (*integrierte Gesamtschule*), which was originally intended to replace the traditional multi-tracked secondary school system and to integrate the three pillars into one integrated comprehensive school rather than adding a fourth pillar to it, was initially introduced as part of an educational experiment in all the West German *Länder* in the mid-1960s (Deutscher Bildungsrat 1969). The double aim of the ‘integrated comprehensive school’ of supporting the development of each individual child according to its abilities through differentiation and of increasing equality of opportunity in the school system through integration at the same time, placed great demands on the organisation of the comprehensive school, the curriculum and the teaching. Even critics of the integrated comprehensive school would acknowledge in historical hindsight that the integrated comprehensive school produced a lot of innovative ideas in its early phase of development such as inner school and inner class differentiation which have had a considerable and lasting impact on the development of the traditional tripartite school system. At the end of the experimental phase of the testing of the integrated comprehensive school the Standing Conference of Education and Culture Ministers (*Kultusministerkonferenz*; KMK) declared in 1982 the mutual recognition of the comprehensive school-leaving certificate and thus accepted the comprehensive school formally as an official type of lower secondary school in Germany.

Most recently, some - primarily East German - *Länder* have merged the *Hauptschule* with the *Realschule* to form what is now called a ‘school with several educational tracks’ (*Schule mit mehreren Bildungsgängen*) and which could be described as a fifth column in the lower secondary school phase (cp. diagram page 5). Other *Länder*, e.g. Bayern, are trying to stop this process. However, given the recent demographic changes in Germany, and the resulting permanently decreasing number of school beginners and the increasingly competitive labour market which clearly favours the more prestigious school leaving certificates from the

Realschule and the *Gymnasium*, it seems highly unlikely that the *Hauptschule* will survive in its present form.

The relative significance of the five different educational tracks in the German lower secondary phase and their development in recent years can be documented ‘at a glance’ on the basis of statistical data used for PISA 2009, which compares participation in education of 15-year-olds in the different educational tracks between 2000 and 2009:

	2000	2009
Hauptschule	19.6	16.8
Schule mit mehreren Bildungsgängen	8.7	6.6
Realschule	25.9	26.8
Integrierte Gesamtschule	8.8	8.7
Gymnasium	28.3	33.5
Berufsschule	5.3	4.0
Förder- und Sonderschulen	3.5	3.7

Participation in education of 15-year-olds in percent according to educational tracks in PISA 2000 and PISA 2009 (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2010: 286)

The decline of the *Hauptschule* and the resulting process of merging an essentially tripartite secondary school system into a system which consist of two pillars (i.e. the *Gymnasium* and schools with several educational tracks) will neither change the position of the *Gymnasium* as the main provider of direct access to HE, nor increase permeability between secondary schools. On the contrary, the outer differentiation of ‘only’ two types of secondary schools will probably sharpen their distinctive profiles and will make permeability between them even less likely. However, for the successful graduates from non-academic secondary schools (i.e. *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and ‘schools with several educational tracks’) there are now numerous opportunities to access HE via vocational educational routes to which we now turn.

Separation between academic and vocational education routes into HE

With regard to the organisation of upper-secondary education (ISCED 3), which is decisive for access to HE, we have to differentiate between academic and vocational education routes into HE. According to the latest monitoring report on ‘Education in Germany 2012’ (*Bildung in Deutschland 2012*), which is produced every two years, 76% of the students at universities and at universities of applied sciences have accessed HE via the academically oriented *Gymnasium*, which is therefore the ‘silver bullet’ of HE access in Germany (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2012, 274). The *Gymnasium* looks back to a history of more than 200 years during which there have been numerous and rather fierce debates about its educational programme and the value of its leaving certificate, the *Abitur*. Thus, phases of opening and widening the school curriculum to include a broader circle of pupils and students have alternated with phases of re-standardization and increased emphasis on academic standards. For example, while the reform of the upper level (Grades 11-12/13 depending on the *Land*) of the *Gymnasium* (*gymnasiale Oberstufe*) in 1972 substantially extended individual options by reducing compulsory subjects and by extending individual subject choices, the developments since have moved in the opposite direction, by identifying a compulsory core curriculum for all A-level students which consists of compulsory subjects and courses (e.g. in maths, German, sciences). In some *Länder* (e.g. North Rhine-Westphalia) the *Abitur* can also be acquired at comprehensive schools, which have included, from their foundation in the 1970s, also an upper secondary phase (i.e. years 10-12/13).

Vocational education at upper secondary level is rather complex and can be divided into two main categories: the so-called dual system (*Duales System*) and the full-time vocational schools (*Berufliche Schulen*). Traditionally and notably in contrast to most European education systems, vocational education which is exclusively organized and run by full-time vocational schools plays only a marginal role in Germany. For the majority of young people in vocational education, the main route into employment is provided and organized by the 'dual system' of vocational education, which consists of a vocational on-the-job-training or apprenticeship in companies and part-time instruction in general and vocational subjects in vocational schools (*Berufsschule*). Vocational education in the dual system usually lasts for three years and the apprentices/students receive a monthly salary which is set and paid by the employers. Although the dual system has been strongly criticized particularly in the 1970s for its emphasis on the practical training provided by the companies, it has enjoyed a very high international reputation. After successful completion of the dual system of vocational education, the graduates receive a professional vocational qualification, which enables them to work as a qualified employee in a recognised occupation that requires formal training.

Among the second category of full-time vocational schools which are attended by about 20 percent of all students in vocational education, the 'vocational training colleges' (*Berufsfachschulen*) represent the majority. These training colleges are fully responsible for the vocational training of their students including the practical internships prior, during and after the vocational training. *Berufsfachschulen* offer a variety of different full-time vocational courses which differ with regard to their entrance requirements, duration and leaving certificates. Thus, the vocational courses offered at *Berufsfachschulen* can range from a basic vocational training which can be obtained during one or two year courses, to vocational qualifications which are awarded at the end of two or three year courses. Under certain conditions the *Berufsfachschulen* can even, after the successful completion of a minimum two year course, award a qualification (*Fachhochschulreife*) which entitles the holder to study at a university of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*).

A second type of full-time vocational school is the so-called *Fachoberschule*, which admits students who have obtained an above average general education school leaving certificate (*Mittlerer Schulabschluss*) which is granted on the successful completion of grade 10 at the *Realschule* or at other lower secondary level school types. The *Fachoberschule* lasts for two years (grades 11 and 12) and qualifies its students to study at a university of applied sciences.

The third type of full-time vocational school at the upper secondary level is represented by the so-called vocational grammar schools (*Berufliche Gymnasien*). The traditional profiles of the academically oriented *Gymnasium*, which are humanistic-classical, linguistic or mathematical-scientific, have in recent years been extended to also include schools with a specific profile in music or economics etc. Some *Länder* (e.g. Baden-Württemberg) have also initiated the foundation and development of so-called *berufliche Gymnasien* which offer a three-year course of education which includes both the general education subjects taught at the upper *Gymnasium* level (*gymnasiale Oberstufe*) and vocational subjects. On successful completion of the vocational grammar school, the successful candidate is awarded the general higher education entrance qualification (*Allgemeine Hochschulreife*) which provides full access to all types of HE in Germany.

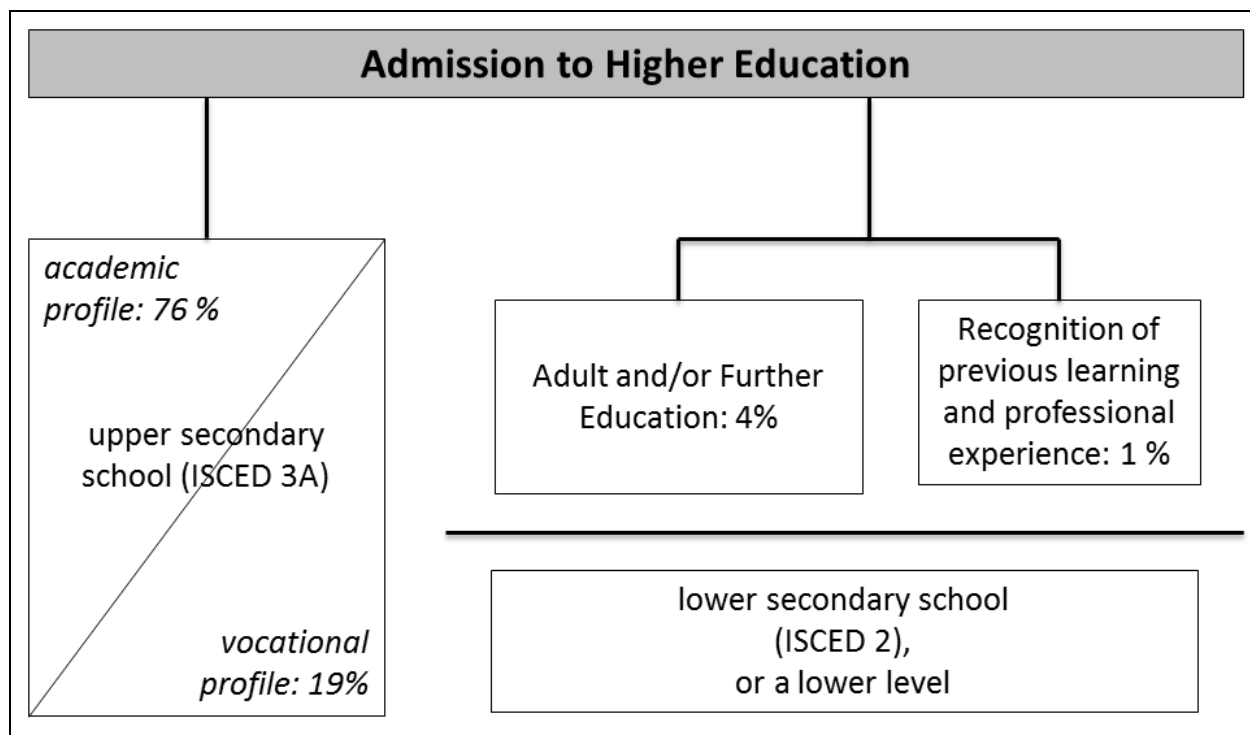
Although current reforms in Germany are aiming at facilitating the transition between vocational education and training and HE⁶, the long tradition of separation between general and vocational education is still visible today (Rothe 2008, 156 f.). According to many German HE experts, e.g. Minks (2011, 23), this division inhibits the development of non-traditional routes into HE, which are based on the recognition of labour market experience and vocational training rather than relying solely on the *Abitur* as the traditional entrance qualification for access to HE.

Dominance of the Abitur as the traditional entrance qualification for access to HE

According to the latest figures of the Federal Statistical Office, in 2010 about 315.950 school-leavers gained the *Abitur*, which is regarded as proving the qualifier's general capability to study a university course. In terms of percentages the quota of students between the ages of 18 and 20 who are eligible to study at universities has risen by 6% since the year 2000 and has now reached 34%. If we add the quota of the 142.500 students who have gained the qualification (*Fachhochschulreife*) to study at universities of applied sciences, which has also risen by 6% since 2000 and has reached 15% in 2010, we can say that in Germany every second member (49%) of the age cohort between 18-20 year olds holds the educational qualification which entitles them to take up a course of study at a university or a university of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*) (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012, 6-7).

If we take a closer look at the altogether 458.400 students who, in 2010, were entitled to study at institutions of HE, it becomes obvious that the *Abitur* is still the traditional entrance qualification for access to HE in Germany. Following the analysis by Orr & Riechers (2010), who compared access to HE in seven European countries, 95 % of all HE students in Germany gained access to HE via an upper secondary school qualification. The vast majority of these students, namely 76%, gained their qualification from a secondary school which had an academic profile (i.e. *Gymnasium*), while 19% gained a more vocationally oriented qualification, qualifying them for access to specific parts of the HE system (for example only the 'universities of applied sciences', i.e. *Fachhochschulreife*) or subject areas (for example only engineering; i.e. *fachgebundene Hochschulreife*). The remaining 5% of HE students fall into two categories: 4% took the so-called '2nd chance' qualification route (*zweiter Bildungsweg*) to gain access into HE institutions. This '2nd chance' route includes the provision of evening schools and/or upgrade training courses for adult learners so that they can acquire the school leaving certificate, which they need to gain access to HE. These courses are usually offered as part-time or evening courses to accommodate the needs and interests of adult learners. In 2010 less than 1% of HE students in Germany gained access through the so-called '3rd chance' qualification route (*dritter Bildungsweg*), which is an umbrella term for the recognition of a person's previous learning and career achievements since leaving school (op. cit., 27-28). In some *Länder* these professionally qualified applicants are given access to HE without further examination, while in other *Länder* the process of recognition of professional competences and qualifications is accompanied by a special aptitude test to assure that the future students will fulfil the expectations placed on them in HE. In summary then, and according to Orr & Riechers (2010, 29), the current distribution of students in traditional (i.e. regular) and alternative (i.e. 2nd and 3rd chance) qualification paths looks like this in Germany:

⁶ These reforms will be described and analysed in more detail in section 4 ("Current policies and discourses of access to HE in Germany").



The illustration shows that the traditionally tight link between the successful completion of upper secondary education - in particular through the academically oriented *Gymnasium* – and access to HE is still strong today. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that according to a study undertaken by Orr & Hovdhaugen (*forthcoming*), the percentage of students in Germany who access HE via non-traditional or ‘second’ or ‘third chance’ routes is in international comparison very low:

In searching for a reason for this, it is interesting to note that Germany also has the tightest link between academic success in the school system and eligibility to enter higher education. This means that introducing second chance routes into the German system effectively calls this tight link into question. However, the second chance routes mainly come from the vocationally oriented side of the education system. In that sense they exist outside of the entitlement model, which can thus be maintained as the regular route (op. cit., 14).

However, despite the national German tradition of linking access to HE very tightly to academic success at school, there has been a noticeable number of reforms in Germany aiming at widening access to HE, which will be described and analysed in section 4 of this report (“Current policies and discourses of access to HE in Germany”).

3) Access to HE in historical and legal perspective: major reforms since 1945⁷

Up until the 1960s access to HE was a rather uncontroversial topic in Germany because the universities had, after the end of World War II, regained their relative autonomy, which

⁷ The following historical account of major reforms since 1945 is primarily based on the studies by Lewin & Lischka (2004) and Täger (2010) and focuses exclusively on West Germany because the issues concerning access to HE which are discussed today are mostly related to the discourses which were held in the ‘old’ Federal Republic of Germany. Readers who are interested in issues of access to HE in the GDR are referred to Below (2009).

allowed them to regulate the admission of students primarily through internal university regulations. More important than the relative autonomy of the German universities is the fact that demand and supply of places in HE were rather balanced in quantitative terms: The average size of the German universities in the first half of the 1950s was between 4.000 and 6.000 students. However, in 1950 only 3 percent of one age cohort gained the general higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*), which, according to Turner (2001, 15), was a rather manageable size, particularly when compared with the corresponding figure of 49 percent, which was reached 60 years later in 2010 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012, 6-7).

What was more controversial in the 1950s was the quality of the students who sought access to the universities. During the beginning of the 20th century and in the wake of progressive education (*Reformpädagogik*), which had aimed at forging the students' personalities and at stimulating processes of *Bildung* rather than simply 'transferring' knowledge and facts, the school curriculum of the *Gymnasium* had begun to distance itself from the academic disciplines and standards, which had formerly been set by the universities. In addition, the ever increasing body of knowledge led to an increased number of subjects and curriculum content in the *Gymnasium*. Although this trend was not pursued during World War II, there was in the 1950s and 1960s a growing dissatisfaction by German professors with the competences of their first-term students, who seemed to have a lack of even elementary subject-specific and methodical knowledge and competences (Lewin & Lischka 2004, 15). As a first result of this public debate on the students' 'ability to study' (*Studierfähigkeit*) in the 1950s, the Standing Conference of Ministers (*Kultusministerkonferenz*; KMK) and the West German Conference of Rectors (*Westdeutsche Rektorenkonferenz*; WRK) jointly developed the so-called *Tutzingen Maturitätskatalog* in 1958. This was a catalogue (*Katalog*) of skills and abilities, the mastery of which was supposed to signify the student's 'maturity' (*Maturität*), which was regarded as an indispensable requirement for taking up any course of study at a German university. Although the *Tutzingen Maturitätskatalog* included also competences such as logical thinking, general education and power of judgement, the catalogue was regarded as rather traditional, stressing primarily the importance of classic languages and philosophy rather than competences in mathematics and sciences. After lengthy and rather controversial discussions about the *Maturitätskatalog* the KMK decided in 1962 to reduce the ever-increasing number of subjects in the *Gymnasium* to six compulsory subjects and thus to establish a 'common core curriculum', the mastery of which would guarantee the students' ability to study any given university course.

In spite of these reforms, the controversy about the quality and skills of the students and their general ability to study (*Studierfähigkeit*) continued and even increased during the 1960s, when Georg Picht (1964) published his much quoted book *Die deutsche Bildungskatastrophe* ('The German educational catastrophe'), in which he claimed on the basis of his analyses of an international OECD study, that Germany's international economic competitiveness was at risk, if the low rate of successful HE graduates did not rise and if Germany did not succeed in reducing social selection with regard to access to upper secondary and HE. In 1969 and as a response to this criticism, the West German Rectors' Conference (WRK) issued criteria for the general higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) and suggested the definition of three curricular areas into which the fragmented and largely subject based curriculum was to be transformed: language/literature, mathematics/natural sciences and society/history.

The suggestions by the WRK became the basis of the reform of the upper secondary school at the *Gymnasium*, which started in the early 1970s. From 1972 onwards students were allowed to set their own individual priorities amongst the upper secondary school subjects as long as they covered the three curriculum areas mentioned above. In addition to the possibility of

setting individual preferences within the curriculum, students were also allowed to choose between different levels of difficulty between courses, allowing them for example to take a shorter and less demanding course in what they considered to be difficult subjects. The underlying aim of this rapidly increasing diversification of the curriculum was to open up the upper secondary school, to reduce its social selection and thus to contribute in general to a massive expansion of HE, which was felt necessary at the time. The diversification of the upper secondary school curriculum proved to be successful in quantitative terms because within 15 years the percentage of successful graduates more than doubled from 13,4 % in 1970/71 to 27,9 % in 1984/85 (Wissenschaftsrat 2004, 125).

At the same time however, increased choice options at upper secondary level also led to an increased heterogeneity of the upper secondary students' abilities and competences - an effect which the WRK had not intended. In addition to differences between individual students, there were also substantial differences between the 12 *Länder*, which implemented the reform of the upper secondary school according to their own (political) preferences and which increased differences between the competences of the first-term students even further (Täger 2010, 30). Thus, the original hope of common and altogether higher abilities and competences of students who take up a course of study in HE institutions had not been fulfilled. On the contrary, the differences between the competences of the students grew steadily and the HE lecturers and professors complained louder than ever before about the students' lacking abilities to study (Lewin & Lischka 2004, 20).

Up until the 1970s the general higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) had been regarded as the sufficient prerequisite for studying any university course. This changed considerably during the 1970s, when overcrowded and congested universities and degree courses required additional entrance criteria to regulate access to HE. As a result of these developments the *Numerus Clausus* (NC) was introduced in those subjects where the number of applicants outnumbered the available places (e.g. medicine, dentistry etc.). The Federal Constitutional Court was instrumental in the introduction of the NC because in July 1972 it passed a ground-breaking law with regard to the introduction of an 'absolute', i.e. nationwide NC for students in a certain courses of study. In principle the Constitutional Court ruled that every citizen who holds a general higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) has a legal right to a place at university and that it is the responsibility of the legislator to issue the necessary selection criteria rather than delegating this task to the providers of HE i.e. the universities (Wissenschaftsrat 2004, 63). The treaty (*Staatsvertrag*) of October 20th 1972 implemented the verdict of the Constitutional Court by suggesting the foundation of a 'central office for the allocation of university places' (*Zentralstelle für die Vergabe von Studienplätzen*; ZVS), which allocated places at universities on the basis the qualification of the applicants (merit principle) as well as waiting time and cases of hardship (social state principle). In 1978 capacity calculation and regulation, which had been a federal right since 1972, was passed over to the *Länder* (treaty of June 23rd 1978). During all these years the capacity of the universities had hardly been extended, because of the generally held assumption that the increased number of students, which had been wished for in the early 1960s and had become reality in the late 1960s and particularly in the 1970s, would be a temporary phenomenon. As a result of the limited capacity of the universities and decreasing job prospects for HE students at the end of the 1970s there was a need to further rationalize and ration HE access, which finally led to an expansion of the NC to other subjects.

During the 1980s continuing debates between traditional and reform-orientated forces led to stagnation with regard to the re-organisation of access to HE. A traditional approach to regulate access to HE was clearly favoured by the 'German Association of University

Professors and Lecturers' (*Deutscher Hochschulverband*; DHV), which set up a commission in 1984 to discuss this issue. The very fact that subjects like natural sciences, engineering and economics were not at all represented in the composition of the commission signalled that great importance was attached to the representatives of the traditional subjects and university disciplines. This was clearly reflected in the following publication of 15 theses, in which the Association underlined the importance of the *Abitur* as the main requirement for access to HE and rejected any specialisation towards a more vocationally oriented curriculum (Heldmann 1984). Towards the end of the 1980s the Association maintained its traditionally conservative stance yet again by stating that HE institutions could and should not take the educational background of the student into account, but should insist on certain minimum entrance requirements, which the academically orientated *Gymnasium* was obliged to provide. In this context the DHV developed a catalogue of requirements and characterised the 'ideal' HE applicants as 'generalists with a broad general education' (Finkenstaed & Heldmann 1989, 20 f.).

The opposing reform-oriented approach was favoured by more progressive university lecturers, who, rather than simply looking at the academic upper secondary school to improve the students' abilities to study, suggested a reform of the study entry phases at all institutions of HE in order to support the increasingly heterogeneous studentship. Thus, the study entry phase should primarily try to balance out the heterogeneous competence and skills levels of the students during the first one or two terms. In addition, the didactic function of the study entry phase was to assist and develop the students' motivation to study and to alleviate their orientation in this difficult phase of transition from school to university through suitable measures and special programmes. Other university lecturers, and particularly those from the domain of physics, advocated and tested suitability assessment tests to select suitable students rather than re-organising lengthy study entry phases, but this selection mechanism only gained acceptance in the course of the 1990s (cp. Täger 2010, 32).

During the 1990s and particularly from 1995 onwards HE in Germany was confronted with new challenges such as the Europeanization and internationalisation of HE, declining financial resources and increasing university drop-out rates, which increased pressures to reform access to HE in Germany even further. In this climate of permanently increasing demand of HE on the one hand and declining financial state subsidies for HE on the other, it does not come as a surprise that reforms in HE aimed at introducing market oriented steering mechanisms by increasing the autonomy of HE institutions, allowing them to develop distinctive profiles and by promoting competition between individual institutions of HE. The selection of students by the universities themselves was regarded as the natural next step in this development. This view was clearly expressed explicitly by Müller-Böling, the first managing director of the highly influential not-for-profit 'Centre for Higher Education' (CHE), which was founded in 1994 on the initiative of the private Bertelsmann Foundation and Hans-Uwe Erichsen, former president of the German Rectors' Conference. According to Müller-Böling, there is "no competition without the free choice of universities by the students and without the selection of the students by the universities"⁸ (Müller-Böling 2000, 125, *author's translation*).

Along with the increasing 'marketization' of HE, the voice of the employers gained importance in the 1990s. The 'German Federation of Employers' (*Bund Deutscher Arbeitgeber*, BDA) claimed that HE should serve the needs of the labour market much more directly.

⁸ „[...] kein Wettbewerb ohne die freie Hochschulwahl für die Studierenden und ohne die Auswahl der Studierenden durch die Hochschulen“ (Müller-Böling 2000, 125).

The acknowledgement that HE also fulfilled an educational and qualifying function for the labour market did not only signify a departure from traditional and unquestioned principles in German HE, but also implied an increased cooperation of two hitherto largely independent systems, i.e. the cooperation between HE and the economy in the fields of research, knowledge transfer, further education and training. In addition, the BDA also expressed its views on the issue of access to HE by demanding minimum formal entry requirements and by opening HE access to people with vocational qualifications. In 2001 the association even published recommendations for universities for interviewing university applicants and thus interfered directly into the debate on HE access (Bund Deutscher Arbeitgeber 2001).

The introduction of local university admission procedures and rules was pushed further forward by the proposals of the so-called *Deidesheimer Kreis*, which consisted in the majority of experts in diagnostic ability testing. In its study “Access to Higher Education and diagnostic ability testing” (*Hochschulzulassung und Studieneignungstests*) which was published in 1997, the *Deidesheimer Kreis* analysed and evaluated different methods and instruments of assessing the students’ ability to study. The main conclusions of these studies indicated that the general concept ‘ability to study’ had to be differentiated and that the ‘ability to study’ depended largely on the varying subject-specific demands. Thus, the *Abitur* was no longer deemed suitable to function as the sole indicator for the general ‘ability to study’. As a result the *Deidesheimer Kreis* suggested allowing for internal, university-based selections of suitable students (Deidesheimer Kreis 1997). The studies and proposals made by the *Deidesheimer Kreis* received much public attention during the late 1990s and after 2000 and can be said to have considerably influenced the discussion on access to HE, which in the end led to the reform of the federal law on HE (*Änderung des Hochschulrahmengesetzes*) in 2004, which can be said to be the legal basis of the current discourses and policies (cp. section 4).

Following the various initiatives in 1990s to strengthen the right of individual HE institutions to regulate the admission of students internally, the groundwork for a legal change was laid in the 4th and 5th amendment of the Framework Act for Higher Education (*Hochschulrahmengesetz*). In §§ 32-33 the selection regulations were modified and the institutions of HE were given the right to select up to 24% of their students in those restricted courses of study which carried an ‘absolute’, i.e. nationwide, NC through internal selection procedures (HRGÄndG 2002). Although most *Länder* and institutions of HE – with the exception of Baden-Württemberg⁹ - did in practice not make use of their newly attributed right, the Science Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) established a commission in 2002 to develop proposals, which were intended to strengthen the right of the universities to select students according to their own regulations by reforming the Framework Act for Higher Education yet again. The commission reported in January 2004 and gave the following rationale for the strengthened participation of the universities in the selection of students in their ‘Recommendations for the Reform of Access to HE’ (*Empfehlungen zur Reform des Hochschulzugangs*):

In future, institutions of HE must participate more actively in the admissions process. This contributes to the profiling of HE institutions and allows them to better match the qualification profiles of university applicants before they start studying to the

⁹ Baden-Württemberg was a pioneer in implementing university-internal selection regulations and procedures and had already allowed its universities in the academic year 1997/98 to select up to 40% of their studentship in those courses of study which had a regional NC.

requirements of individual courses of study (Wissenschaftsrat 2004, 5; *author's translation*).¹⁰

Following the recommendations of the Science Council, the German parliament decided in July 2004 to reform the federal law on access to HE, which regulates the allocation of university places in courses of study with an absolute (i.e. federal) NC and which had in the past been allocated by the 'Central Office for the Allocation of University Places' (ZVS). In the 7th amendment of the Framework Act for Higher Education it was decided that from the beginning of the academic year 2005/06 onwards up to 60% of the restricted university places could be allocated by the universities themselves (HRG 2004). The allocation of HE places for degree courses which are not restricted is regulated by the HE laws of the individual *Länder* and these again allow for a far-reaching devolution of the rights of selection to the institutions of HE themselves. However, in practice the relative autonomy of HE institutions and their academic subjects and disciplines to allocate HE places is restricted by the German constitution which legally entitles every qualified graduate in Germany to be allocated a place in HE. As a result the *Länder* ministries of education and science and individual universities negotiate so-called capacity regulations which stipulate the number of students per HE institutions or determine the minimum and the maximum limits for certain subjects per university and thus restricts the intended flexibility and freedom of action yet again (cp. Heilbronner 2007, 99 ff.).

In summary, the historical analysis of major reforms of the access to HE in Germany since 1945 indicates that since the 1960s the allocation of university places was increasingly influenced by state regulations. In the attempt to balance out demand and supply the Federal State and the *Länder* repeatedly called upon the courts and even the Federal Court of Justice, which – in particular with reference to the nationally and locally restricted subjects and courses of study - issued the main statutory provisions for all actors involved in the allocation of university places (i.e. students, HE, the federal state and the *Länder*). In historical perspective the reform of the Framework Act for Higher Education in 2004, which substantially increased the autonomy of institutions of HE with regard to selection and recruitment of applicants by allowing university specific and subject specific assessment of the students' aptitude, signifies a modified return to the practice of HE admission before the 1960s.

4) Current policies and discourses of access to HE in Germany

As suggested in the previous chapter, the current policies of access to HE in Germany are legally based on the reform of the Framework Act for Higher Education (2004). Since the beginning of the winter term 2005/06 institutions of HE can select a certain percentage of students in those degree courses which are federally restricted (i.e. biology, pharmacy, psychology, human, dental and veterinary medicine). According to the Framework Act for Higher Education 2004) the allocation of students by the 'Central Office for the Allocation of University Places' (ZVS), which was taken over by the 'Foundation of University Admission'

¹⁰ „Die Hochschulen müssen künftig aktiver an der Zulassung mitwirken. Dies trägt zu ihrer Profilbildung bei und ermöglicht es, die Qualifikationsprofile von Studienbewerbern bereits vor Studienaufnahme besser mit den Anforderungen einzelner Studiengänge abzustimmen" (Wissenschaftsrat 2004, 5).

in 2009¹¹, is based on a ‘20-20-60 percent quotation system’. This means in practice that 20 percent of the available university places are allocated to those students who achieved the best average grades in their General Higher Entrance Qualification (*Abitur*). A further 20 percent of available university places are allocated on the basis of the waiting time elapsed since the acquisition of the *Abitur* and the graduate’s application for a university place. The waiting time is measured in university semesters (i.e. six months) and the maximum number of semesters is 16 (i.e. four years). Studying a different subject at a different German university while waiting does not count as waiting time.

The remaining 60 percent of available university places are allocated by the universities themselves, which receive the students’ application directly from the ‘Foundation of University Admission’. The selection and recruitment procedures are decided autonomously by the individual universities, but usually the following criteria or a specific combination of these criteria are applied (Heine et al. 2008): The average grade of the *Abitur* or alternatively weighted grades in individual subjects which are regarded to be of high relevance for the chosen academic disciplines or subjects can be applied again as a first selection criterion. Secondly, in some courses of study (e.g. art, music or sport) subject-specific aptitude tests are applied to check the suitability of individual candidates for the chosen course of study. Thirdly, vocational qualifications and professional experience can contribute to the candidates’ qualification for access to HE and finally the institutions of HE can use the results of subject- and university-specific tests which check out the students’ ability to study (*Studierfähigkeit*) as a fourth criterion for access to HE.

For the selection of students for those subjects and courses of study, which are not restricted by an ‘absolute’ (i.e. nationwide) NC and are therefore not regulated by the ‘Foundation for University Admission’, the universities have two main procedures to regulate and restrict access. Firstly, universities can introduce a so-called ‘local NC’ for selected courses of study and subjects, if they can prove that the demand exceeds their pre-defined capacities, which they have negotiated with the ministry of education and/or research. Secondly, and according to the Framework Act on Higher Education, universities have the right to allocate places of study on the basis of their own selection criteria. These criteria are identical with the above mentioned criteria within the ‘60 percent quotation system’ and include one additional criterion, which is the possibility to select students on the basis of interviews in which the candidates’ motivation and their beliefs about the chosen course of study are scrutinized (HRG 2004, § 32, section 3 ff.). The Framework Act for Higher Education also regulates that, whatever combination of criteria is chosen, the average grade of the *Abitur* must always be one important criterion for the selection of students (HRG 2004, § 27).

Apart from these most recent reforms of access to HE, which were initiated by the Framework Act for Higher Education (2004) and which apply to the large majority (i.e. 95%) of the overall ‘traditional’ studentship, there has also been a noticeable number of recent reforms which are aiming at reforming access to HE for non-traditional students. As was suggested in section 2 of this report, the percentage of students who enter HE via alternative routes (i.e. ‘2nd and 3rd chance’ qualification routes) is, at 5 percent, very low in Germany, particularly when compared with the equivalent figures in other European education systems such as England/Wales or Sweden, where more than 25 percent of students access HE via non-

¹¹ Following the passing of the founding law, dated 18th November 2008, the ‘Central Office for the Allocation of University Places (ZVS) was transformed from public-law institution into a ‘Foundation of University Admission’ (*Stiftung für Hochschulzulassung*). The Foundation Council, which is the highest decision-making body, consists of equally representative members from HE and the *Länder* (cp. www.hochschulstart.de).

traditional routes (Orr & Riechers 2010, 34). However, currently we can observe a number of reforms in Germany which are aiming at widening access to HE. According to a recently undertaken study by Orr & Hovdhaugen (*forthcoming*), these reforms intend, in particular, to facilitate ‘3rd chance’¹² qualification routes into HE. As a response to the shared claim made in 2008 by the employers’ associations and representatives from HE, that opening access to HE to vocationally trained and qualified people is an important step to increase permeability between different tracks and levels of the education system and to extend and optimize educational qualifications acquired at an earlier stage of the educational career (BDI/BDA/HRK 2008, 3), the Standing Conference of Education and Culture Ministers (KMK) recommended in 2009 to open universities and colleges and to allow students with certain vocational and professional qualifications to enter HE (KMK 2009). Although these recommendations by the KMK have, according to a study by Nickel & Duong (2012), not fully been implemented in every single *Land*, Orr & Hovdhaugen summarize the present situation of non-traditional students with a vocational education and training background in rather positive terms:

The state regulations for entry into higher education have changed substantially since 2009. In all 16 German states, people who have completed a two-year vocational training and worked in their profession for three years can now obtain a subject-bound entry qualification (*fachgebundene Hochschulreife*) without additional conditions. The attainment of an unconditional general entry qualification – like the *Abitur* – remains regulated differently from state to state. [...] Overall, however, the subject-bound entry qualification is much easier to obtain for those who have taken a vocational route through the education system (Orr & Hovdhaugen, *forthcoming*).

According to the already quoted study by Nickel & Duong (2012), who monitored the development of non-traditional student entrance numbers between 2007-2012 on local (i.e. university), regional (i.e. *Länder*) and federal levels, the number of first term students without *Abitur* rose from 1,09 % in 2007 to 2,08% in 2010 (p. 29). Thus, although there are large variations between the *Länder*, the new state policies to widen access to HE in Germany and to make allowances for vocational education routes in particular seem to be working. In addition, and according to Orr’s & Hovdhaugen’s analyses, the new state regulations seem to attract students from low education backgrounds. This observation is particularly important for the German context, because the connection between social class and academic success in schools and in HE, which is - even in international comparison - particularly strong in Germany, has been the object of much public concern in recent years and has been very high on the political education agenda:

The share of German students entering via accreditation of their prior learning, work experience and/or special examination is about 1%, but this rises to nearly 3% for students from low education backgrounds and 6% for those who entered higher education after a significant delay and are likely to have had work experience. In sum, we can conclude for Germany that the share of students entering higher education via alternative routes has grown significantly. We can also see that the initiatives are well targeted because they are particularly effective at facilitating higher education entry

¹² The term ‘3rd chance’ qualification route (*dritter Bildungsweg*) to HE is used in analogy to the terms ‘1st’ and ‘2nd chance’ qualification routes to HE. However, in contrast to the first two qualification routes, ‘3rd chance’ students do not gain access to HE on the basis of their school-leaving certificate (e.g. *Abitur* or *Fachabitur*), but on the basis of the recognition of their previous learning and career achievements since leaving school.

for students from low social backgrounds and lifelong learners. However, the overall share of these new entrants remains very low (Orr & Hovdhausen, *forthcoming*).

Before we turn to the analysis of the effects and side-effects of the above mentioned policy reforms of access to HE (cp. section 5), we need to take a closer look at the most recent quantitative development of student numbers (eligible and enrolled students) as well as transition, entry, graduation and completion rates etc., because they provide important background information for the current discourses of access to HE in Germany.¹³

According to the most recent figures published by the Federal Office of Statistics, 2,4 Mill. students were enrolled in German institutions of HE in 2011 and according to the latest estimates this number increased again by 5% in 2012 and has now reached 2,5 Mill. students (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013, 6). Compared to the number of students in 2001, there has been an increase of 27% and if we look at the development of the universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) in isolation, the number of students has risen by 59%. Overall this has led to the highest number of students ever enrolled in German universities. Apart from the general trend to acquire higher qualifications, which is visible in most education systems, there are a number of special effects which account for this all-time-high of students in Germany in 2011. Firstly, the number of obligatory school years at the academic *Gymnasium* was reduced from nine to eight years in different *Länder*, which led to double rates of school-leavers with higher education entrance qualifications between 2007 and 2011. Secondly, *Berufskademien* (vocational academies) were given the status of institutions of HE (*Hochschulen*) during the last ten years in some *Länder* (e.g. Baden-Württemberg, Saarland), which has raised the number of students even further. Finally, the obligatory military and social service was abolished in 2011, which meant that thousands of young men entered HE, who would have otherwise entered HE one year later.

For a study on access to HE the rates of eligible students¹⁴ (i.e. students who hold HE entrance qualifications) are more interesting than the number of enrolled students, because they represent the potential students of the future. According to the latest figures the rate of eligible students reached 57% in 2011, which means that three out of five pupils from one age cohort hold a formal entrance qualification to study at a German university. Between 2001 and 2011 this rate has increased by almost 21 percent (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013, 9). However, this increasing number of eligible students does not correspond to the transition rates into HE (i.e. students who actually take up a course of study). In 2011 less than half of all eligible students (46%), who gained their HE entrance qualification in 2011, took up a course of study in the same year. Although the transition rates have been rising since 2006, when the transition rate (one year after upper-secondary graduation) reached only 31%, these rates are still rather modest when compared with the transition rates in the 1960s and early 1970s which exceeded 80% (Griesbach & Heine 2000). The reasons for these large variations have been analysed repeatedly. According to studies by Egehn & Heine (2006), the main reasons for declining transition rates are varying perceptions of job prospects for academics, the sharp rise of students who hold qualifications to study at universities of applied sciences

¹³ The following analysis of quantitative developments with regard to issues of access to HE is based on the statistical data which are provided annually by the Federal Office of Statistics (Statistisches Bundesamt 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013). The data are complemented by the indicator-based National Reports on Education (*Education in Germany*) of the Authoring Group Educational Reporting, which have been published every second year since 2006 (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012) and the OECD reports *Education at a Glance* (OECD 2011, 2012, 2013).

¹⁴ The rate of eligible students is worked out in the following way: For each age cohort, the percentages of school-leavers with a HE entrance qualification are calculated and added up.

and who have a much lower disposition to take up a course of study as well as the increasing number of students with HE entrance qualifications who choose to take a vocational training. More recently the introduction of study fees¹⁵ and the increasingly decentralised procedures of selecting and recruiting students have also had a negative impact on the students' disposition to study (cp. Täger 2010, 77).

Other indicators that need to be considered in this context are the first-time graduation rates at tertiary level (i.e. the estimated percentage of an age cohort that will complete their first-time tertiary education, based on current patterns of graduation) in relation to the entry rates (i.e. the estimated percentage of an age cohort that will enter tertiary education for the first time during their lifetime) because this ratio can convey some indications as to how far the current access regulations are working properly. In 2011 30,9% of one age cohort graduated from the different types of HE institutions. This signifies an increase of almost 14% from 2001, when the graduation rate reached only 17%. However, although the graduation rate has risen sharply in the last ten years, there is still a relatively high number of students who drop out during their first course of study. If we follow the calculations by the Federal Office of Statistics and take six years as the average study time in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012, 15) and compare the graduation rates in 2011 (30,9%) with the entry rates in 2005 (37%) (Statistisches Bundesamt 2007, 10), there is still a difference of more than 6 percent, which shows the extent of drop-outs in German HE. Again, this rate has dropped sharply since 2005, when the difference between the entry rate (34%) and the graduation rate (21%) was 13%.

However, if we look at the figures more closely and analyse the so-called completion rates in 2010 (i.e. the proportion of new entrants into a specified level of education who graduate with at least a first degree at this level), it becomes obvious that the average completion rate of 75% differs largely between the *Länder* (e.g. between 83,5% in Baden-Württemberg and 64,5 % in Hamburg) and between subject groups (e.g. between 65,4% in mathematics/natural sciences and 94,9% in human and veterinary medicine) (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012, 18-19). For the study of issues of access to HE these university drop-out rates are quite significant, which are, however, subject to different interpretations. High drop-out rates could, for example, indicate that students are failing because they chose the wrong subject or because they were mistaken about their personal aptitude for a certain course of study. Alternatively, varying drop-out rates between subjects could indicate that some traditionally severely restricted subjects like medicine have low drop-out rates (in 2010: 5,1%) because of their strict selection mechanisms (NC plus aptitude tests etc.), while drop-out rates in other subjects (e.g. mathematics/natural sciences) are much higher (in 2010: 34,6%) because they are less restricted and are lacking rigorous selection procedures. Finally, the variation of drop-out rates between the *Länder* could also be caused by different student-teacher-ratios which vary from 12,9 students per professor/lecturer in Saarland to 24,7 students per professor/lecturer in Nordrhein-Westfalen (op. cit., 17-19).

5) Critical review of the system of access to HE in Germany: past and present

This section aims to critically review the German system of access to HE by identifying its strengths and weaknesses¹⁶. Concentrating firstly on the problems and weaknesses of the

¹⁵ In the meantime study fees have been abolished again in some *Länder* (cp. section 6 for more details).

¹⁶ Particular attention will be paid to those issues of access to HE, which are also of importance for the Greek case and which have been identified in the remit (cp. section 1).

system of access to HE in Germany, we have to differentiate between traditional weaknesses of the German system of access to HE and current problems which are mainly the result of the most recent reforms of the access regulations and which were introduced by the Framework Act for Higher Education in 2004 (cp. section 4).

Starting with an analysis of the recent effects and side-effects of the de-centralisation of the allocation and selection procedures to the universities on the basis of the ‘20-20-60 percent quotation system’, we have to state that most institutions of HE have introduced internal selection procedures since 2005. However, according to a study by the ‘Higher Education Information System’ (HIS), the extent and frequency as well as the selection criteria of internal selection procedures differ largely between individual subjects. Almost all subjects and academic disciplines, which in the past relied on aptitude tests (e.g. medicine, art and sports), have introduced new internal selection procedures in the meantime, while other subjects such as engineering and cultural studies have been much slower in developing and applying internal selection procedures. The choice and the combination of relevant selection criteria is equally heterogeneous between subjects. While the average grade in the *Abitur* is still by far the most favoured selection criterion, interviews and motivation letters are far less frequent (HIS 2006: 39-51). This points to the first negative side-effect of the new access regulations. Administrative as well as academic staff in institutions of HE criticise the high expense in terms of time and staff which is necessary for the development and execution of new selection instruments and procedures. Especially time-consuming selection procedures such as interviewing students and/or evaluating their motivation letters are not very popular with members of the administrative and academic staff in German HE, who are usually not supported by professionalised ‘Admission Services’, which are quite common in other systems of HE (HIS 2006: 55-75).

A second and far more visible negative side-effect of the decentralised selection procedures are multiple applications by students, who apply simultaneously at several institutions of HE to increase their individual chances of HE entry. According to a study by Müller (2007), this leads to a competition between universities and subjects, which compete for the best and most suitable future students. A second effect is that the best and most suitable students receive several offers because the selection criteria of the universities and subjects are similar. However, since even the best applicant can only take up one admission, a high number of places offered by universities and individual subjects are not utilized (Müller 2007, 19). This has negative implications for the universities and the students. For the universities it means that they do not necessarily get the best applicants and that they might not be able to fill up all their vacancies (Dwenger et al. 2008, 202). For the majority of students this means that in the first round of applications there is a lower number of available vacancies because the best students will simultaneously share the majority of vacancies among themselves (Müller 2007, 19). This makes a large number of study places only available in the second round of applications, when the best students have made their choices between their several options and thus causes delays and non-transparencies in the allocation of study places for the majority of applicants. The situation is aggravated even further by strategic applications by students, who, in anticipation of high rates of applications to popular universities and other institutions of HE, chose to apply directly to less popular universities to make sure that they increase their chances of admission to HE. This leads to misfits between students’ individual preferences and allocated institutions of HE¹⁷ (Dwenger et al. 2008).

¹⁷ The quantitative extent of these misfits between students’ individual preferences and allocated institutions of HE will be analysed later in more detail (see below).

A third negative effect of the most recent reforms of the system of access to HE is its impact on upper secondary education and in particular its effect on the general HE entrance qualification (*Abitur*). In recent years the *Abitur* has gained importance through a number of initiatives by the KMK which aimed at re-strengthening its position by standardising its content as well as the correction procedures. Initiatives to be mentioned in this context are the definition of a core of obligatory exam subjects (i.e. German, mathematics, one foreign language, one natural science), the development and rapid implementation of educational standards (i.e. clearly defined subject-specific competence levels in mathematics, German, English/French which need to be demonstrated by successful upper-secondary school graduates) and finally the introduction of centrally devised exit exams at *Abitur*-level in all *Länder* apart from Rheinland-Pfalz. Most recently a number of *Länder* have decided to develop a joint pool of common *Abitur* test papers for core subjects. From 2014 onwards the six *Länder* Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Bayern, Sachsen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Niedersachsen want to introduce common exit exams at *Abitur*-level to guarantee comparability (FAZ 23.09.2013). While the above-mentioned initiatives have strengthened the importance of the *Abitur*, the introduction of university-based aptitude tests and other selection mechanisms has undermined its significance, because they are controlled and applied exclusively by the institutions of HE rather than the schools. This has severely reduced the unique function of the *Abitur* as the main indicator of the students' general ability to study. Presently the *Abitur* (or equivalent certificates) still remains an obligatory prerequisite for HE access in Germany, but it has largely changed its function as a 'certificate of ability' to study to a 'certificate of entitlement' to study.

The current controversies over the function of the *Abitur* as a certificate of entitlement or as a certificate of ability points to the uneasy relationship between the upper secondary school and HE, which has a long history and can be regarded as one of the traditional weaknesses of the German system of access to HE. According to the historical analyses by Oelkers (2007), the transition problems from upper secondary school to HE date back to 1788 when the grammar schools (*Gymnasien*) and universities in Prussia decided jointly to refrain from a qualifying examination organised by the universities, but to leave the assessment of the ability to study (*Hochschulreife*) entirely up to the schools. The lack of communication and co-operation between the upper secondary schools and the HE sector continues until the present day. Thus, to quote Oelkers again, it would be fair to say that "the effective operationalisation of the constructs 'ability to study' or 'higher education maturity' has never been achieved properly"¹⁸ (op. cit., 5, *author's translation*) and that both institutions were never really able to define more accurately, what they mean by these constructs. As a consequence, "the grammar school subject curricula were", according to Oelkers, "never really connected with the academic subject curricula at the universities. What was expected at the beginning of HE studies, was not synchronised with what could be achieved at the end of the grammar school time"¹⁹ (op. cit., 5 f., *author's translation*).

Another traditional weakness of the system of access to HE in Germany is the relatively high number of stagnant and long-term students²⁰. Traditionally German students enter HE at a

¹⁸ „Es ist nie gelungen, die Konstrukte ‚Studierfähigkeit‘ oder ‚Hochschulreife‘ wirksam zu operationalisieren [...]“ (Oelkers 2007, 5).

¹⁹ „Die Lehrpläne der Gymnasien sind nie an die Fachcurricula der Universitäten angeschlossen worden. Was bei Beginn des Studiums erwartet wurde, war nicht mit dem abgestimmt, was am Ende der Gymnasialzeit erreicht werden konnte“ (Oelkers 2007, 5 f.).

²⁰ Again, as with the number of drop-out students, the high number of long-term students needs to be interpreted carefully. The high number could indicate that the 'wrong' students have been recruited, and/or that the recruited students have wrong expectations about the course of study they enrolled for, and/or that students misjudge their

rather advanced age. In 2005, for example, the average age of students entering HE in Germany was 21,7 years (Statistisches Bundesamt 2006). In the past this problem was aggravated additionally by the fact that students in Germany also spent a much longer time in HE than their European counterparts, which made German students the oldest students in Western Europe. However, in recent years this situation has improved significantly. If we look at the overall study time of students in Germany (i.e. the overall number of years or terms that students spend in HE to reach their first degree) over a longer period of time, it becomes obvious that the average number of years spent in HE has been constantly declining over the last 30 years. While the average overall study time at universities had reached 7,5 years in 1983, it had decreased to 6,7 years by 2003 (BMBF 2005) and in 2011 it had dropped to 6,2 years (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013, 17). The reduced study times in Germany also become apparent, when analysing the average age of the first-time graduates. According to the most recent figures published by the Federal Statistical Office, the average age of first-time graduates was 26,6 years in 2011. This means that the average age of first-time graduates has gone down by more than 1,5 years since 2001, when it was at 28,2 years (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013, 20-21). For reasons mentioned earlier, this reduction cannot simply be contributed to reduced study times, but has also been caused by the earlier school entry age, the reduction of the grammar school from nine to eight years and the abolition of the obligatory military and social service. However, the main reason for the significantly lower first-time graduation age is, according to the Federal Statistical Office, the introduction of Bachelor degree courses in German HE²¹, which have reduced the average study time significantly (op. cit., 20-21).

Further weaknesses of the German system of access to HE, which have often been claimed in the past and are also currently discussed in public, are the frequent misfits between students' individual preferences and their allocated institutions of HE and subjects. In fact, as Wolter (2001) points out in his analysis, the claim that a high percentage of students in Germany cannot study at their preferred institution of HE was one of the main arguments in the 1990s to support the decentralisation of the allocation of study places to the institutions of HE themselves (op. cit., 285 f). However, if we look at the choices and motivations of first-term students, which are regularly surveyed by the 'Higher Education Information System' (HIS), it becomes obvious that this claim is only partly justified. According to the figures published by HIS (2013), the percentage of students who were able to study at their preferred institution of HE in the winter term of 1995/96 was 83% and only 11% of the students were not allocated their preferred institution of HE (HIS 2013, 112). If we compare these figures with the most recent figures, which are available for the winter term 2011/12, the percentage of students dissatisfied with regard to their allocated institutions of HE has risen from 11% to 16%, but still three out of four students (75%) are studying at the institutions of their first choice (ibid.). In a similar way, the frequently claimed mismatch between the students' individual subject preferences and their allocated subjects is a rather rare phenomenon. In the winter term 2011/12 nine out of ten students (89%) were able to study their first choice subject and only 9% would have preferred to study a different subject (HIS 2013, 64). The same figures for the winter term 1998/99, which are 85% (allocated first choice) and 10% (preferred a different

own aptitude for certain subjects. Irrespective of the most plausible interpretation, the optimal matching of the competences and interests of the students on the one hand and the demands and qualifications required by the academic subjects on the other hand remains a constant challenge and will therefore be taken up again in the final part of this report on 'discourses and initiatives for the future' (section 6).

²¹ In 2011 almost half of all first-time graduates (49% percent) finished their studies with a bachelor degree (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013, 21).

subject) indicate that, perhaps contrary to expectations, the frequently claimed mismatch between students' individual preferences and their allocated subjects was, and is, a rather small phenomenon in German HE.

While the phenomenon of stagnant and long-term students has been reduced in recent years (see above) and the mismatches between students' preferences and their allocated places and subjects of study are apparently less dramatic than assumed, the problem of social (in)equity in access to HE has been one of the main weaknesses of the German system of access to HE in the past and is also today considered as one of its major problems. Although there is widespread consensus that the educational expansion of the last decades has also increased the educational chances of members of lower social groups, it is equally agreed that this development has not led to a widespread reduction of social inequity with regards to educational chances (cp. Becker/Lauterbach 2004, S. 10). In the 1950s and 1960s only between 4-6 percent of university students came from parental homes in which the father was a manual worker, although the percentage of manual workers amongst all male employees ranged between 50-60 percent (Mayer 2008, 624). If we look at the present participation rates of different social groups in HE and analyse the main factors of influence, it becomes obvious that access to HE is still primarily dependent on the educational background and status of the parents. Thus, the chance of a child of academics visiting a secondary upper school, which is still the main access route into HE, is at 88% almost twice as high as the chance of the child of non-academic parents at 46%. The processes of social selection at the different educational transitions from the primary school to HE are working cumulatively, so that in 2006 only 23% of students with fathers who do not hold an academic degree took up a course of study in HE. The corresponding figure for new degree students from fathers with academic degrees is 83% and therefore almost four times higher (vgl. BMBF 2007, 108). According to the most recent annual survey by the HIS (2013), the social selectivity of the German education system is still very high: in the winter term of 2011/12 only 18% of the new entrants belonged to a lower social group, whereas almost twice as many students (34%) belonged to the highest social group (HIS 2013, 9).

With these figures in the background it does not perhaps come as a surprise that the rates of eligible students in Germany (i.e. those who are entitled to study because they have a higher education entrance qualification) have in recent years been consistently below the OECD-average. This indicates that many OECD countries exploit their potential of eligible students much more comprehensively than the German system of education and HE. This is not only due to the vertically structured German system of lower secondary education, as stated previously, but also to the rather restrictive and complicated admission regulations in Germany which rely heavily on formal entry qualifications and hardly allow for alternative and 'non-traditional' routes into HE. However, the main reason for the relatively low rate of eligible students is probably the very elaborate system of vocational education and training, which provides alternatives for young people and which will be dealt with later in this section.

If we turn the table and try to identify the strengths of the German system of access to HE, two general points must be made first. To begin with, it seems that the German system of HE has so far been able to strike an effective balance between the necessary quantitative expansion of the HE ('massification') on the one hand and the trend towards qualitative improvements and diversification in HE ('excellence', 'elitism') on the other hand. In particular, Germany has been rather late to take up the international trend towards excellence and elitism in HE and it is still too early to evaluate the effects of the so-called 'excellence initiative' in HE, which was started in 2005 by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and which included the foundation of 'clusters of excellence' and the identification

of so-called ‘elite universities’ which have received massive additional Federal funding since 2006.

The second general point that has to be mentioned when looking at the strengths of the German system of access is the fact that – perhaps contrary to expectations – it has been seen that the system of HE and its access regulations have been able to change. The rigid structural and institutional regulations with regard to the organisation of the HE sector and in particular with regard to the admission and selection of students that used to be characteristic in the past have been replaced by a more heterogeneous system of HE and a more decentralised and flexible system of access. This has caused new problems (s. above), but it has also created new opportunities and strengths, which will be characterised briefly in the remainder of this section.

The increased institutional heterogeneity of the HE sector plays an important role in balancing out supply and demand of HE study places. In particular the foundation and constant expansion of new types of HE institutions such as the ‘universities of applied sciences’ (*Fachhochschulen*) since the 1970s, which are run in close co-operation with companies and industry and thus alleviate the transition of graduates into the labour market have reduced the pressure on the traditional universities, which otherwise would not have been able to take up the ever-increasing numbers of students during the last decades. One of the positive ‘side-effects’ of the introduction of ‘universities of applied sciences’ is that they have opened up doors for vocationally educated and trained students and thus given a ‘second’ and/or ‘third chance’ access to students who would otherwise not have found access into HE at all. Although the numbers of students who take up these ‘alternative’ routes into HE are still quite low - especially when compared internationally to countries like Sweden -, the observation that these new types of universities have the strongest growth rates in German HE points to the fact that they are highly popular with both the vocationally oriented students and the employers. As long as industry and companies in Germany are prepared to take on graduates from the ‘universities of applied science’ and to employ them on a permanent basis, these institutions will continue to grow and thus take the pressure off the traditional universities.

A further important traditional strength of the German system of access to HE is that at upper secondary level (ISCED level 3A) there is an even-keeled balance between general and vocational education. It is particularly the traditionally strong and elaborate vocational sector in the German education system which provides real alternatives to general/academic education and qualification in grammar schools (*Gymnasien*). The vocational sector has recently been strengthened again by the foundation of so-called ‘vocational grammar schools’ (*berufliche Gymnasien*) which are intended to bridge the gap between vocational and general/academic education and have proved to be very popular and successful with German students because they provide a solid basis for a further vocational training, while also providing their graduates with the general higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*).

After successful graduation from the upper secondary school level the vocational sector provides attractive alternatives for school-leavers and thus reduces the pressure on the HE system yet again. The best indicator for this is the high percentage of upper secondary school graduates who, although eligible to take up a course of study in HE, do not pursue this option, but decide to begin a vocational training instead. Again, as in the case of vocational education and training at upper secondary school level, the attraction of this educational route will very much depend on the ability and willingness of industry to continue to offer vocational training places both in companies and as part of the dual system and to also employ successful trainees on completion of their apprenticeship on a permanent basis. In other words, the attractiveness

of the vocational sector relies heavily on the success of the German economy and in the past there have also been phases, when German industry and companies found it rather difficult to provide enough trainee places in the dual system.

One last strength of the German system which needs to be mentioned here concerns the transition from HE to the labour market. While the transition from upper secondary school into HE and particularly the co-operation of the two main participating institutions (i.e. grammar schools and HE) has been characterised as rather problematic (s. above), the transition from HE into the labour market has in recent years become much smoother. Two reasons in particular can account for this improvement. Firstly, the establishment of BA and MA degree courses as part of the Bologna process and the following introduction of competence based curricula in HE has made the work of the HE sector not only more transparent, but also more specifically targeted to the needs of the labour market. Secondly, the transition from HE to the labour market has been improved through the introduction of the so-called ‘professional academies’ (*Berufsakademien*). As outlined in section 1, the ‘professional academies’ offer academic training at study institutions combined with practical in-company professional/vocational training. The three-year courses offered at the ‘professional academies’ are in keeping with the principle of the dual system and alleviate, through their combination of alternating study and training sequences, the direct transition into the labour market even before the end of the three-year-course.

The critical review of the strengths and weaknesses of the German system of access to HE has so far excluded financial considerations. The reason for this is that the funding of HE in Germany does not easily fall into either of the two categories employed in this analysis (i.e. strength and weakness) because the available data is ambivalent. If we compare the funding (public and private sources) of the tertiary sector in Germany with the funding of HE in other OECD states, the situation in Germany does, on first sight, not appear very favourable. Taking the years 2000 and 2008 as reference years, the funding of HE in Germany as a percentage of the GDP has only marginally gone up from 1,1% in 2000 to 1,2% in 2008. In addition, these figures are in both reference years well below the OECD average which was 1,3% in 2000 and at 1,5% in 2008 (OECD 2011, 229). However, if we analyse the annual expenditure per student in tertiary education in 2008, it becomes obvious that the expenditure is with 15.390 USD per student substantially higher than the OECD average, which is ‘only’ 13.717 USD in the same reference year. What is perhaps more relevant than the absolute investments in HE in international comparison is the reliability of the funding assurances given by the state, because only reliable long-term funding assurances facilitate the development of long-term strategies in HE. In this respect the funding of HE in Germany has gained reliability in recent years, because the Federal Government and representatives from the *Länder* and HE negotiated and signed the so-called ‘Higher Education Pact’ in 2007, which guarantees reliable state funding for a number of years. The ‘Higher Education Pact’ is amended, if need arises. Thus, the Federal Chancellor and leaders of the *Länder* Governments agreed on June 13th 2013 to sign the ‘Higher Education Pact 2020’ and to invest an additional 2,7 billion euros of Federal funding in the expansion of study opportunities until 2018, which had become necessary due to the unexpected admission of additional university entrants.²²

²² <http://www.bmbf.de/en/6142.php> (downloaded on 02.12.2013)

6) Discourses and/or initiatives for the future

The critical review of the strengths and weaknesses of the system of access to HE in Germany in the last section points to a number of areas of concerns which will have to be dealt with in future initiatives.

The main issues stem from the decentralisation of the system of access to HE to the institutions of HE themselves and from the ‘reform of Federalism’ (*‘Föderalismusreform’*) in 2006, which has strengthened the role of the *Länder* in HE considerably. Since 2006 the 16 *Länder* have had the right to deviate from the Federal Law and to develop their own access regulations to HE. This has led to a situation in which both the Federal State and the *Länder* can issue access regulation for HE. The ‘reform of Federalism’ in 2006 was meant to increase the competition between the *Länder* with regard to their education and HE systems, but it has also led to a situation of non-transparency and inconsistency with regard to allocation and selection criteria between the *Länder*, between individual institutions of HE and between subjects. As a first result of the increased autonomy of the 16 *Länder* with regard to the organisation and financing of their HE sectors, eight *Länder* have introduced study fees of maximum 1.000,00 € per academic year and student from 2006 onwards to increase the Federal budget for HE, which was from their perspective insufficient. However, the introduction of study fees in some *Länder* has led to migrations of students from those *Länder* with study fees (i.e. Bayern, Baden-Württemberg, Niedersachsen) to those *Länder* without study fees (e.g. Nordrhein-Westfalen). In the light of these student migrations most *Länder* (e.g. Baden-Württemberg) have recently abolished the study fees again, so that in the majority of the *Länder* studying is free of charge.

Regional disparities in demand for HE are further enhanced by the fact that German students seem to clearly prefer, with the exception of Berlin and Sachsen, universities in West German *Länder* to the universities in the East German *Länder* (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012 and 2013). In the light of these developments the teacher union (*Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft*; GEW), already in 2009, called for a Federal law which regulates the access to HE²³. However, after years of decentralisation in German HE the introduction of a Federal law, which regulates access to HE seems presently rather unlikely, but the question as to whether access to HE should be regulated centrally or simply left to free individual choices is not finally settled and will certainly remain on the future political agenda.

Closely related to the issue of Federal versus *Länder* authority with regard to the regulation of access to HE, is the question as to whether the acquisition of the ‘general higher education entrance qualification’ (*Abitur*) can be left entirely under the authority of the 16 *Länder*. Particularly for applicants to subjects and disciplines which carry an ‘absolute’, i.e. nationwide, NC (e.g. medicine, psychology etc.) it seems unfair if they are competing with students from other *Länder* who have achieved better final grades in their *Abitur*, because the standards are lower in that particular *Land*. Complaints about apparently varying *Abitur*-standards between the different *Länder* have been critically observed by representatives from HE and industry for many years, but the recent introduction of common educational standards and even a joint pool of common *Abitur* test papers might indicate that, in spite of the much quoted autonomy of the *Länder* with regard to education, German education might in future move towards a Federal common core school-leaving exit exam at upper secondary school level. If this were the case, then this would also mean that the entrance qualifications of

²³ Cp. Press notice of the GEW on 27.01.2009.

vocationally trained students, who are now also entering HE via ‘alternative’ educational routes, would have to be standardised too, or at least move towards minimal common standards.

Since the *Abitur*, as stated previously, has lost its function as the main indicator of the student’s ability to study, the development of local university entrance exams and other selection instruments will be another urgent task for the immediate future. Universities in Germany are currently experimenting with a multitude of tests and selection criteria. In distinction from earlier efforts to assess the students’ general cognitive ability to study, current diagnostic assessment tests of students’ aptitude are trying to assess the ‘suitability’ of students for specific subjects. Thus, the aim is to increase suitability and to better match the abilities of students with the specific demands of individual subjects and disciplines. The development of these instruments is still in the early stages of development and the empirical evidence with regard to the predictive efficiency of individual selection and recruitment instruments and mechanisms is not entirely conclusive.

The biggest challenge for the future however, will be the attempt to raise the number of students who are eligible to study. Although the eligibility rates went up in Germany by 21% between 2001 and 2011 and reached 57% in 2011 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013, 8-9), they are still below the OECD average. To raise these rates, three challenges in particular will have to be tackled. Firstly, efforts to open up ‘alternative’ (i.e. ‘second’ and ‘third chance’) routes into HE for ‘non-traditional’ students will have to be intensified. Although there has been remarkable progress in recent years and the number of new entrants to HE without the *Abitur* has almost doubled from 1,09% (of all new entrants) in 2007 to 2,08% in 2010 (Nickel & Duong 2012, 29), these numbers are still far away from the leading HE systems in this respect (e.g. Sweden and England), which recruit far more than 25% of their studentship through ‘alternative’ routes. To open up alternative routes into HE will also require intensified efforts to bridge the gap between vocational and academic education and to create hybrid (i.e. vocational/academic) qualifications, which also allow access to HE.

Secondly, the issue of social (in)equity and disparity in access to HE needs to be addressed more systematically in order to reach improvements in this respect. This challenge cannot be dealt with by the HE system single-handedly, because social inequity is inherent in the German education system and seems to start very early in the educational career of children with the choice of the lower secondary school. However, the latest PISA results by the OECD (2013), which indicate that the very close connection between social class and success at school is gradually diminishing in German secondary schools, show that improvements in this respect are possible, if they are systematically targeted.

Thirdly, and finally, to raise the number of eligible students will also require raising the number of students with a migration background, who are underrepresented in German HE and who, more often than their non-migrant background counterparts, drop out of the HE system. The fact that the percentage of foreign students is currently at an all-time high in German HE, is not only an indicator of the attractiveness of the German HE system, but also an expression of the economic crises in other European countries and education systems and it should not distract attention from the fact that the low HE participation rates of students with migration background, who already live in Germany, could and should be improved.

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